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SUBJECT: A U.S.-TRAINED INFANTRY BATTALION: CORNERSTONE OF GDRC NATIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY?

REF: KINSHASA 23; 09 KINSHASA 1073

CLASSIFIED BY: William J. Garvelink, Ambassador, Embassy Kinshasa;
REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶11. (C) Summary: The GDRC's recently unveiled three-zone national defense strategy (ref A) places Kisangani as the focal point of one of the zones. A USG effort to construct a training facility in Kisangani to train a professional light infantry battalion appears to be a major cornerstone of developing the Kisangani zone. Construction of the training center continues, with phase II training scheduled to commence at the facility on February 17. Cooperation with the Kisangani area military and political officials has been far better than expected. A local contractor showed poloff the blueprint for a planned new presidential retreat near Kisangani, an indication that the President may plan to spend more time in this strategic city. End summary.

Background

¶12. (C) Responding to a direct request from President Kabila, President Bush committed in October 2007 to assist the DRC to develop a modern and professional army. The cornerstone of this assistance is USG development of a program to train a Congolese army (FARDC) battalion, alternatively called a commando or rapid reaction force by the GDRC. The USG program, implemented by AFRICOM and private contractors, called for a multi-phase training regimen beginning with FARDC officer and non-commissioned officer leadership and staff training followed by battalion maneuvers integrating junior soldiers. Once on the ground, however, U.S. instructors discovered a force lacking even the most rudimentary soldiering knowledge. As FARDC capacity was severely lacking, the training program returned to basics. Rather than honing the skills of would-be crack commandos, the ongoing program of instruction focuses on no-frills infantry training of a light infantry battalion (LIB) training, a designation preferred by U.S. trainers. American instructors conducted phase one training of approximately 120 commissioned and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) in Kinshasa at the FARDC School for Advanced Military Training ("Le Groupement des Ecoles Supérieures Militaires"); at the same time, construction of a Congolese training base for battalion-level maneuvers began in Kisangani. Phase two is scheduled to last for approximately six months beginning February 17.

¶13. (C) In various meetings with USG officials, GDRC representatives expressed satisfaction with the progress and potential of the U.S.-training program -- and they have implicitly requested its expansion. Interlocutors from the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the FARDC unveiled a loosely-defined national

defense strategy based on three defensive zones (ref A), each anchored by a U.S.-trained rapid reaction brigade. In addition to expanding the program from one battalion to the nine necessary to field three brigades, FARDC Colonel Nkumbo said that officers composing subsequent battalions would be new graduates from a military college in accordance with the armed forces reform plan (ref B). He noted, however, that "being well trained is useless without equipment" and asked that the U.S. and other donors consider now the steps necessary to make modern equipment available to the forces once trained.

Site Under Construction

14. (C) The training installation, currently referred to as Camp Base, is situated 10 kilometers northeast of Kisangani city center along the main road leading from the Kisangani International Airport. The site is approximately two kilometers from the main road, connected by a hard-packed red dirt road at the intersection of which is a squad-sized 10-person canvas tent with cots for FARDC military police who maintain internal security. Local contractors with FARDC engineer support constructed the road, which is capable of two-way traffic at speeds of between 60-80 kilometers per hour and remains passable even during heavy rains. Camp Base is a rudimentary site with ongoing renovations and new construction projects. Engineers razed approximately eight buildings in various

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stages of disrepair in addition to leveling terrain for bivouac sites. Clearing of tall grasses and clumps of trees uncovered colonial roads, two of which were refurbished for use as interior roads. The physical plant will eventually consist of a bivouac site with cement floors, an internal cantonment area for family members accompanying soldiers-in-training, a firing range, and an administrative building for instructors. Another portion of the site houses an agricultural project that will enable the training center to produce their own provisions, thus removing a potential source of strain between soldiers and the nearby community.

15. (C) Officers, NCOS, and soldiers are selected for this prestigious training by the GDRC, and their names are vetted according to provisions of the Leahy Act. Instructors, both American contractors and U.S. Army trainers, report high morale among the trainees. To distinguish soldiers undergoing U.S.-led training from other FARDC units in the training area, the USG recommended that the MoD issue a distinctive uniform, unit patch, and the inclusion of names on uniforms. These measures would develop pride and unit cohesion in the trainees and help identify them to local populations -- removing both impunity by anonymity and misidentification should other FARDC soldiers mistreat local civilians. The site currently lacks an armory and the trainees are not issued weapons (Note: Weapons familiarization will be a component of training. End note). While the absence of functioning weapons on site curtails serious human rights violations by soldiers-in-training, it also puts them at a dangerous disadvantage against common thievery or in the unlikely scenario of another regular or paramilitary force launching a raid against their position to acquire food, money, or equipment. The FARDC military police company providing physical security could be overwhelmed or outmaneuvered given the camp's remote location and relatively large, open perimeter. To offset these situational shortfalls, the program has both local and regional political and military command support.

16. (C) Camp Base is in the 9th Military Region commanded by General Jean-Claude Kifwa. General Kifwa, a proponent of the training program, detailed a FARDC officer to liaise with the American instructors and deal with any day-to-day problems, such as bypassing police road blocks set up outside the Camp Base entrance.

American contractors reported being stopped recently by police demanding payment of a local vehicle fee. In another incident, police stopped a USG delegation en route to the training site under identical circumstances and allowed them to proceed only after the FARDC liaison intervened. In a meeting with the USG delegation, Kifwa explained the delay was a routine and legal police stop of a civilian vehicle without diplomatic or GDRC plates (Note: USG visitors and American contractors use local for-hire vehicles at that remote location. End note); however, he offered an official pass for use in the vehicles to prevent any future stops or potential harassment. (Comment: Kifwa's staff spoke with apparent ease and frankness in his presence supporting his reputation as a respected leader with both political and rank-and-file support. End comment.)

17. (SBU) During poloff's visit to Kisangani, Mayor Guy Shilton Baendo Tofuli Molanga said he welcomed the training site on the outskirts of his city. There have been no problems with the recently arrived officers and NCOs, though some in local civil society misperceive (and some, perhaps, mischievously so) Camp Base as a U.S. military installation. Baendo also welcomed the arrival of additional soldiers to round out the battalion. Poloff noted that the U.S. training program emphasizes citizen skills as well as soldier skills and suggested the Camp Base flag pole, which naturally flies the Congolese flag, should be extended to visibly address concerns of the surrounding population. Orientale Province Governor Medard Autsai Asenga's assistance resolved a politically sensitive problem: cutting the grass at the airport. Only one runway met safety specification standards for takeoff and landing of U.S. military cargo aircraft, but that runway was overrun with undergrowth. Airport authorities rejected USG requests to clear the airstrip citing understaffing and competing priorities. Governor Autsai personally intervened with the administrators resulting in an airfield able to receive USG planes with necessary equipment to complete a fully operating base. The full contingent

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would also exceed field expedient methods of sanitation, leading to a local contract for mess and latrine facilities with the owner of a wide-ranging local enterprise, BEGO-Congo.

18. (C) BEGO-Congo is owned by Jean-Marie Bergesio, a Belgian and life-long resident of the DRC. American contractors and USG officials stay at his atmospheric hotel in Kisangani. Bergesio is well connected in provincial politics and has an adopted Congolese son well-placed in the national police headquarters in Kinshasa contributing to both police protection and political access. Indeed, an American contractor in Kisangani showed poloff photos of a site under construction by Bergesio for President Kabila. Once completed, the sprawling complex would be a presidential retreat approximately 10-15 kilometers upriver from Kisangani.

19. (C) Comment: The three defensive zone strategy centers on the largest urban areas of Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, and Kisangani and could extend political control into surrounding rural areas by influencing key population centers near international borders. The strategy, if implemented, could also help restore some of Kisangani's lost luster. Known before independence as Stanleyville, Kisangani is an historic city where the Lingala-speaking and Swahili-speaking regions of the Congo converge. Until recently it was also the lynchpin of the nation's economy and served as Kinshasa's main nexus to the eastern provinces because it is home to the Congo River's last port before the river is no longer navigable. To be truly effective, the plan requires currently nonexistent force projection and/or air reconnaissance assets. Reported plans to build a presidential retreat near the Kisangani training center may signal presidential interest in the LIB. End comment.

GARVELINK